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ABSTRACT

One key issue at the heart of conducting classroom discussions is why teachers are attempting to initiate a discussion and what they can do to initiate effective classroom discussions. This paper considers this issue. The paper first considers two classroom discussions which revolve around a short story, "Only Clowns Passing Through" (Jeanne A. Taylor) which could be used to challenge students to think about parents and their children who are struggling with different ethical choices. It finds that the first discussion is dominated by the teacher and the students appear to be confused by the teacher's questions, but in the second discussion the same teacher assigned students to work in small groups to characterize the protagonist's values, and this made for a more effective discussion. The paper next suggests six strategies for initiating authentic discussion: (1) create controversy through activities that involve challenging questions or problems; (2) pose questions or problems that do not have easy answers or solutions; (3) connect the questions or problems to students' lives; (4) connect students' knowledge to the literature they study; (5) the teacher should strive to make sure that the questions asked or problems posed require critical thinking on the part of students; and (6) the teacher should give students adequate time to respond to complex questions. It explains what is meant by each of these strategies, and then uses two activities to illustrate what these strategies look like in the classroom. Activity sheets are appended. (Contains 17 references.) (NKA)

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LET'S GET STARTED: STRATEGIES FOR INITIATING AUTHENTIC DISCUSSION

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LET'S GET STARTED: STRATEGIES FOR INITIATING AUTHENTIC DISCUSSION

By Larry R. Johannessen

In an article on how to conduct effective classroom discussions in *the Journal of Reading,* James Barton points out that "Leading an effective discussion can be one of the most difficult tasks of teaching" (346). The solution to this problem, according to a number of standard teaching methods textbooks is to have teachers learn to create better questions. One methods textbook suggests that teachers ask fewer convergent questions, or direct or closed questions, that limit an answer to a single or small number of responses, and ask more divergent questions, or questions that encourage a general or open response. While there is nothing wrong with the advice given by standard methods textbooks—indeed, asking more divergent questions is probably a good idea--the truth is that they ignore a more basic question that is at the heart of the problem of having effective classroom discussions and that is **why** are we attempting to initiate a discussion. One key issue then is why are we attempting to initiate a discussion and what can we do to initiate effective classroom discussions?

Consider the following two classroom discussions of the short story "Only Clowns Passing Through" by Jeanne A. Taylor (1980) that could be used to challenge students to think about parents and their children who are struggling with different ethical choices. The story centers on the lives of a working-class African American family and the inner conflict experienced by Amy when her teenage children and her husband demand that Amy place her live-in and eccentric mother in a rest home. As Amy tries to decide where her loyalties lie, her mother suddenly dies. Because the

third person narrative leaves the question of why Amy uses all of her family's savings for her mother's funeral unanswered, the reader is left to examine her motives. The teacher ultimately wanted students to write a composition explaining why Amy decides to spend the family's savings and insurance money on Grandmother's funeral and for a monument at her grave site rather than on a new home. The following discussions are from an article by Newell and Johnson (1993). Here is an excerpt from a discussion the teacher had in one of her classes. In this discussion, the teacher is attempting to get students to explain why Sissy, Amy's daughter, is proud.

Teacher: If I say "proud," give me some details from the story that she is proud. What proof can you offer from the story?

Student 1: She doesn't want her Grandmother to be around her friends.

Teacher: OK. She's embarrassed for her friends. What's something another character says about her that shows she's proud. What's something her mother says abut her?

Student 2: I don't know.

Teacher: Well, look. Remember Sissy goes to the mother and says ...

Student 1: She says she won't stay ... if Grandmother Delilah is there.

Teacher: OK. Is that an example of being proud?

Student 3: Her pride is hurt 'cause she wants to sleep in her own bed.

Teacher: OK. She is proud because she wants to sleep in her own bed. What else does her mother say about her? Doesn't someone call her uppity?

Where is that in the story? Take a look at the story. Does the Father say it?

Student 1: No. Well ... I thought it was the mother, Amy. (Newell & Johnson, 1993, 57)

There are a couple of striking things about this excerpt. First, the teacher dominates the discussion. And, the students appear to be confused by the teacher's questions. Perhaps because the teacher's questioning is pointing the students toward her interpretation of the story rather than toward creating a problem to be solved through what students had taken away from the story, the students struggle to discern a direction in the questions. From the students' perspective, the string of questions are not tied to a coherent line of thought, or problem or issue to explore, and as a result, the discussion does not provide a thoughtful exploration of Sissy's pride.

Notice the difference in the following discussion in a different class. In this class the same teacher assigned students to work in small groups to characterize Amy's values. To do so, each group rank-ordered a list of values such as loyalty sincerity, pride, etc., and then developed a rationale for their rankings (see Kahn, et. al., 1984). The teacher then asked each group to report their findings to the entire class for consideration and further discussion:

Teacher: Greg, tell us why your group thought that love was something Amy values. Tell us why you thought it's love.

Student 1: When she says ... Well, she wanted a new life for her family. That was love.

Student 2: She doesn't want ... because she loves her mother, 'cause her mother took care of her for a long time, and now she feels she needs to take care of her mother because she is old and she can't take care of herself.

Teacher: Because she feels that somebody has done a lot of things for her, and she feels obligated to do things for her now.

Student 3: She also loves her daughter. She loves everyone. But she loves her mother a lot. What it comes down to is that her mother raised her and she is going to die pretty soon. And she wants her to be happy.

Teacher: Does Amy just love her mother?

Student 1: No. She loves her daughter, too. She loves everybody (laughter).

Teacher: How do you know that?

Student 2: Because ... she loves her daughter because she was going to choose her daughter over her mother. Here's where things got complicated.

Teacher: She was going to choose her daughter over her mother?

Student 2: Well, it seemed like it to me. She loves her husband, but he wants her mother out of the house. Now Amy has to decide between people she loves and who love her, too.

Teacher: I think we have pretty good evidence that she was a loving person. What about loyalty? I think we talked about loyalty to her mother, too.

Student 3: You see, that's the problem. Her loyalty to her mother makes it hard for her to be loyal to others in the family. That's where she has to decide

> what to do. She can love everyone ... like that's a good idea, but she has also realized that loyalty has to count, too. (Newell & Johnson, 1993, 56)

The tone and the direction of this discussion are quite different from the first. The teacher established the tone and direction by first creating a problem for students to solve—how would you characterize (rank order) Amy's values—and then with her opening request in the class discussion for a group to characterize Amy's values: "Greg, tell us why your group thought that love was something Amy values?" Rather than basing the analysis of Amy's character exclusively on her own interpretations of the textual evidence, the teacher begins with the interpretations the small group discussion had generated. In other words, she gave the students a problem to solve in their small groups, and now opens the class discussion by encouraging the whole class to consider the problem. Additionally, when the teacher does offer new ideas about the story, she builds upon what the students have offered: After student 2 comments that "she needs to take care of her mother 'cause she can't take care of herself," the teacher adds the notion of "obligation," or, in other words, adds a new wrinkle to the problem under consideration: "...and she feels obligated to do these things for her now." This new information is part of the process of creating controversy that will encourage students to further inquire into the problem and ultimately enable them to construct an interpretation of Amy's conflict between her role as a daughter and as a mother. Note also that the teacher then asks the students to explore Amy's dilemma: Should she be obligated to her mother or her daughter?

In other words, she emphasizes the fact that this is a problem that does not have an easy answer.

Strategies for Initiating Authentic Discussion

These two very different class discussions help to illustrate some key strategies for initiating authentic discussion. Here are six strategies you can use to initiate authentic discussion:

Strategies for Initiating Authentic Discussion

1. Create controversy through activities that involve challenging questions or problems (Create a classroom climate that is inquiry-driven);
2. Pose questions or problems that do not have easy answers or solutions;
3. Connect the questions or problems to students' lives;
4. Connect students' knowledge to the literature they study;
5. Teacher should strive to make sure that the questions asked or problems posed require critical thinking on the part students;
6. The teacher should give students adequate time to respond to complex questions.

First, let me explain what I mean by each of these strategies, and then I'll take you through an activity or two that will help you see what these strategies look like in the classroom.

1. Create controversy

We need to focus our instruction on controversial questions or problems, or, in other words, create an inquiry-driven classroom. The instruction needs to present a

puzzling event, question, or problem. In wrestling with the problem, the students need to

- Formulate hypotheses to explain the event or solve the problem;
- Collect data to test the hypotheses;
- Draw conclusions;
- Reflect on the original problem and the thinking processes needed to solve it. (Johannessen, 2001).

Furthermore, as Kahn, Walter, and Johannessen (1984) point out, the instruction needs to engage students in exploring problems that are intrinsically interesting to them, that have no quick or easy solutions but are open to a variety of solutions and/or interpretations, and that are complex but not too complex or abstract for their particular level. As stated above, an important dimension of inquiry "problems" is providing a set of data (or devising a means for students to collect data) that they can bring to bear in attacking the problems.

Another important dimension of instruction is the use of small group collaboration to promote high levels of student-to-student interaction. This element is important because it helps students gain a greater understanding of other perspectives. As students' ideas or hypotheses are challenged by others, they revise and refine their thinking. As several researchers note, small-group collaboration also provides scaffolding for students while they are learning new strategies so that ultimately they internalize procedures and are able to tackle new tasks effectively on their own.

2. Pose questions or problems that do not have easy answers or solutions

It is extremely important that the question or problem encourages a variety of thoughtful responses that require students to wrestle with the question or problem. If the solution is one that can be arrived at easily or quickly, then the question or problem should be redesigned. Another way to think of this is to design problem-based activities that encourage multiple perspectives.

3. Connect the questions or problems to students' lives

Think about the multitude of things we ask students to do in school that have no connection to their lives. The questions or problems need to be designed with our students in mind. Just because something is interesting to us does not mean that it is necessarily going to be interesting to them. We need to design our problem-based learning instruction so that it somehow connects to them and their lives.

4. Connect students' knowledge to the literature they study

This is not easy to do, but in designing questions or problems we need to make sure that we are tapping into their prior knowledge or connecting what they are learning in the activity to the literature under consideration. Look at the sample discussions I provided. The first did not.

5. The questions or problems should require critical thinking

It isn't enough to design interesting and challenging questions or problems—they must also encourage or require our students to engage in critical thinking. In other words, they must ask our students to use the kinds of procedural knowledge that will

help them to develop analytical and critical thinking skills important in problem-solving, analyzing literature, and writing thoughtful papers.

6. The teacher needs to provide adequate time to respond to complex questions.

Research indicates that one of the mistakes many teachers make is that they do not allow students enough time to answer complex questions. It is important that we recognize that when we ask complex questions, we can not expect students to be immediately ready with an answer. When we ask complex questions, we need to allow students adequate time to respond. One strategy is to add an additional seven to fifteen seconds on to our wait time, the time from when we finish asking a question and make the next move in a class discussion. We need to recognize the complex questions require more time for students to think and formulate a response.

DOES SHE DESERVE HONOR?

The first page of my handout (See Appendix) contains an activity that I have used to help prepare students for Nathanial Hawthorne's novel, *The Scarlet Letter,* and also to teach students some of the skills and strategies involved in writing argument. I am going to ask you do this activity somewhat like I would have students do it, and try to show you how it does or could meet the six strategies for initiating authentic discussion.

A major purpose of the activity is to help students overcome their initial difficulty with the seemingly alien seventeenth century colonial Puritan society of Boston, Massachusetts. In addition, another purpose of the activity is to prepare students for some of the issues and themes in the novel, such as social responsibility, Puritanism, and

the other perspectives that Hawthorne brings into conflict with Puritanism. This activity might also be used to introduce some of the skills of argumentation, such as making and supporting claims with evidence, warrants, and/or refutation or counter arguments.

(Read case.) After reading the case, I often have students write their responses to the questions posed at the bottom, and then I put students in small groups and have them read their responses and attempt to reach a consensus as a group on whether Jennifer Dinesen should be admitted to the National Honor Society. Since we are short of time, I'm going to ask you to tell me your responses to the two questions at the end of the case. Again, try to decide whether or not Jennifer Dinesen should be admitted to the National Honor Society.

Let's hear some of your responses. What did you decide and why.

Then, with students, after 15 minutes or so--after most or all have reached a consensus, some groups may not be able to agree--I reform the whole class. (You might want to compile the results of their decisions on the board. I have found that this can be an effective way to focus the discussion on the key elements of student disagreement.) Then, I lead a class discussion focusing on the reasoning for their decisions.

This discussion forces them to consider a large audience of their peers--just as they had to do the same thing in their small groups--why, for example, an unwed mother would or would not "lead" others in the wrong direction. In other words, the activity is structured so that students must consider the same sort of issues and arguments that they will be reading about in the novel. In terms of the thinking skills involved in argument, they must come up with arguments and counter-arguments and evidence from the case to justify their decisions. For example, in attempting to explain why an unwed mother has

not lost her "character," students will have to refute the opposing viewpoint that an unwed mother is not of strong character.

Here are some questions to use as a guide in leading the class discussion or in helping small groups attempt to arrive at a consensus:

*How would you define "good character"?

*What qualities of "character" does Jennifer exhibit, if any?
How does she exhibit them? What qualities does she lack?
How does she lack them?

*Does "good character" have anything to do with Jennifer's situation? Why or why not?

*Has Jennifer lost her "character"? Why or why not? Explain.

*What does "leadership" mean?

*Why qualities of "leadership" does Jennifer exhibit, if any?
How does she exhibit them?

*What qualities does she lack? How does she lack them?

*Will Jennifer "lead" others in the wrong direction? Why or why not?

*Should Jennifer be admitted to the National Honor Society? Why or why not?

*What arguments and evidence will the opposing view point to? How might you refute them?

These questions help students focus in on key elements of the case and refine their arguments and counter-arguments.

It is important to note that there is no **one** right or wrong answer. This inevitably leads to lively small group and whole class discussions in which students are actively debating, considering the very issues they will read about and practicing the thinking skills involved in argumentation.

Here is an example of an exchange that took place in one eleventh grade class after students had discussed the questions in small groups:

Student #1: We thought Jennifer exhibited strong leadership because after she had her baby she devoted all of her out of school time to her most important responsibility--"caring for her baby daughter." She is showing others that she is taking responsibility for her actions.

Student #2: We thought exactly the opposite. She lives at home with her parents. Her parents are supporting her and "they take care of the baby" when she is at school. If she was really a leader, she would get a job and support herself and her baby instead of letting her parents support them.

Student #1: You're wrong. When most high school girls get pregnant, they usually hide it so that nobody knows. Jennifer is just the opposite. She is taking a lot of stuff from other kids in school. It shows a lot of "courage" to stay in school, keep her daughter, and face all the stuff from other kids. She is showing other kids that you can make a mistake and live with that mistake.

Students #3: You just said it: "Mistake"! By getting pregnant she made a mistake that shows she lacks leadership. A true leader would not go crying to everyone about how "deeply hurt" she is by the faculty selection committee's decision because she has "worked so hard for four years."

What this brief example illustrates is how the activity engages students in the debate they will encounter in the novel and involves them in the skills of argumentation, particularly refutation. Also, they are making inferences about her true motives and drawing on evidence in the case to support their interpretations, which is exactly what they ill have to do when they read the novel and, for example, make inferences about Hester's motives for refusing to divulge who Pearl's father is and learn about the conflicting values in Puritan society.

Once all students have had a chance to express their views, you might want to have students discuss arguments and counter-arguments that seemed particularly strong and what made them strong, as well as those that were weak and why. Also, you might want to discuss how weak arguments and counter-arguments could be improved.

As a follow-up you might have students write a composition explaining why Jennifer should or should not be admitted to the National Honor Society. Students should include counter-arguments to refute opposing viewpoints.

What is particularly gratifying about doing this activity prior to their reading is that as students read the novel, they are often quick to point to the case when they discuss their interpretations. I am most pleased when some student suddenly says, "This is just like that case we read about Jennifer Dinesen."

Clearly, this case creates controversy in the classroom. In most classrooms students debate the case for a full period or more. Students become actively involved in discussing the problem, and, of course, there are no easy answers here. Most often, the class discussion ends without a clear resolution, but rather with the idea that students

have wrestled with burning questions. That is not a bad thing. I think you can see how the problem presented in this case connects to students lives. It concerns a high student and an issue that they have ideas and opinions about. It is based on a real case that took place three or four years ago. As I said earlier that problem presented in the case clearly connects to issues in the novel, and the problem is framed in such a way that the students are engaging in critical thinking that will help them interpret and write about the literature. Finally, even though I have left out the teachers comments in the short excerpt from the class discussion. It is important to point out that there are three things the teacher might do with this activity to ensure students have adequate time to respond to the complex questions. First, the teacher might have students write about the case, which gives students time to think through their views prior to the discussion. Next, I would recommend having student meet in small groups and try to reach a consensus on their answers. This gives students more time to wrestle with the problem and do some additional thinking, but in a less threatening environment. Finally, the whole class discussion allows students still more time to express their views, and the only things the teacher needs to make sure happens is that he/she should make sure all students get an opportunity to express their views, and this may not be all that easy. Most will have something to say. Also, the teacher should make sure to give students enough time to explain their views and opinions.

SURVIVAL DILEMMA: WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

The next activity on the next page of your handout (See Appendix) is designed as a prereading activity for works such as William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, Stephen

Crane's "The Open Boat," Richard Conlin's "The Most Dangerous Game," Jack London's "To Build a Fire" and *The Call of the Wild.* The activity is intended to put students in a "survival mode"--to make them think about what it takes to survive in a given environment. In addition, this activity also gives students practice in the skills and thinking strategies involved in argumentation. This activity contains "built in controversy" (See Kahn, Walter, and Johannessen, 1984). Again, there is no one answer. The activity helps students practice strategies such as generating supporting evidence for a claim, challenging others viewpoints, clarifying reasoning, answering objections from their audience, giving and explaining evidence, and criticizing faulty logic.

If you will follow along as I read the case and assignment. (Read problem.) After reading the problem to students, I put them in small groups to come up with their solutions. Sometimes I have them come up with their own solution before putting them into groups. After 15 or 20 minutes, longer if they need it, I reform the class for discussion. I have students present their solutions and discuss differences.

Usually this activity generates such a lively discussion that often I need only use the first question and the debate begins. But here is a set of guide questions we use to keep the discussion moving and keep students on task.

- What is one thing your decided you could definitely get rid of? Why?
- Does any group disagree with that? Why?
- What is one thing you should definitely keep? Why?
- Does everyone agree with that? Why? Why not?
- What items on the list haven't we discussed? What would you do with x (item)? Why?

- What is your complete list of what you are going to keep and what you are going to get rid of and why?
- How does your list give the group the best chance for survival? Why?

In the small group and whole class discussions students are confronting the very kind of problem the characters are faced with in the literature and they are verbally practicing the thinking strategies involved in argumentation, and, of course, they are learning and practicing skills and strategies that are important in a variety of subject areas. Here is an example of the kind of discussion that takes place in the whole class discussion. The following example is from a twelfth grade remedial class. They are arguing about the necessity of oars.

Student #1: There's nowhere to row in the middle of the Atlantic anyway, so why do we need oars?

Student #2: But what if they start to go over a waterfall. They would need to row to stay away from it.

Chorus of voices: No, no, no Carla.

Student #3: They are in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. It is an ocean. There aren't any waterfalls in the ocean.

Student #4: We thought we should keep at least two oars because if we see a ship then we would be able to row to it.

Student #5: But it says that there are strong winds and high waves. Oars are going to be useless in conditions like that.

The important point here, besides the funny things that students sometimes say, is that giving students a concrete situation results in emotional involvement in the problem. Also important is the fact that there are a number of possible solutions. Had the list of items included a number of clearly nonessential items such as benches, food storage boxes, and an anchor, the solution could be too clear cut to be arguable. And without argument the students would not be practicing the thinking strategies essential to effectively persuade others of their viewpoints and important in other disciplines, and I would not be effectively preparing them for the "survival: values under stress" problem that they will encounter in the literature they are about to read.

Even though the activity primarily focuses on the physical necessities for survival, often the activity reveals values inherent in the problem and the discussion then focuses on the social dimensions.

Once all students have had a chance to express their views, I often have students discuss arguments that seemed particularly strong and what made them strong, what kinds of arguments seemed weak and why, and how certain arguments could be refuted.

As a follow-up, I have students write to convince others that certain choices of what to keep and what to throw away will give the group the best chance for survival.

Conclusion:

I hope that the strategies I have discussed here today will help you design instruction that will help you effectively begin authentic discussions in your classes. At the heart of what I have said here today is the idea that we need to create a classroom

climate that is inquiry driven. As Donald C. Orlich, et al., argue in talking about the va;ie of this kind of instruction,

> Perhaps the most crucial aspect of the inquiry method is that it allows both student and teacher to become persistent askers, seekers, interrogators, questioners, and ponderers. The end result occurs when your students pose the question every Nobel Prize winner has asked: "I wonder what would happen if . . . ?" (291-92)

I thank you for your attention.

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APPENDIX

STUDENT ACTIVITY SHEETS

DOES SHE DESERVE HONOR?

Jennifer Dinesen, a high school senior, was denied induction to the National Honor Society (NHS) because she is an unmarried mother. A faculty selection committee at Streamridge High School invited Jennifer to join the school's National Honor Society but then revoked the offer when it discovered that the 18 year old had a daughter. Students are selected for the National Honor Society based on four criteria: character, leadership, service, and scholastic achievement. Dinesen met the academic requirements, but the committee felt that because she is an unwed mother her character is in question and she is not a good role model (leader) for other students.

The rules of the National Honor Society state that "pregnancy cannot be the basis for automatic rejection," but each school is allowed to set its own standards as long as they are applied consistently. The superintendent explained that Jennifer Dinesen is not the first student at Streamridge to be denied membership in the school's honor society because of sexual activity.

As a senior, Jennifer has a 3.8 grade point average. She has been a member of the Spanish Club since freshman year and served as secretary of the club her sophomore year. She was a starting player on the junior varsity girls' basketball team her freshman and sophomore years. During her junior year, she was in charge of decorations for the school's homecoming dance, and she also worked as a volunteer four hours a week at a local day care center for disabled children. All of her out-of-school time during her senior year has been spent caring for her baby daughter. Jennifer lives with her parents, and when she is at school, they take care of the baby. She has not received any discipline referrals for four years.

Jennifer says, "I'm deeply hurt by the school's decision because I have worked so hard for four years."

Questions

What is at issue are two qualities the honor society demands: leadership and character. As an unwed mother, has Jennifer lost her character? Will she lead others in the wrong direction? Do you agree with the faculty committee's decision not to induct Jennifer Dinesen into the National Honor Society? Why or why not?

Survival Dilemma: What Would You Do?

A ship is sinking, and you have managed to board a lifeboat with twelve other people. Most of the people were not able to reach the cabins to get warm clothing so they are in street clothes. One woman is in a bathing suit. The ship is in the North Atlantic, and the temperature is about 32 degrees Fahrenheit, and there are strong winds and high waves. The lifeboat has no motor, so it must be rowed. You may have to spend several days at sea depending on when the boat is spotted. The ocean is very foggy with low, heavy clouds. The boat is dangerously overloaded so in order to keep safely afloat you **must** dump 60 pounds of weight. You must decide which items you will remove. For safety reasons, you may not suspend any items from the lifeboat. You may not remove any of the people. These are the items from which you must choose:

5 slicker raincoats with hoods -- each 2 lbs.
30 cans of tuna fish (flip tops) -- each 1 lb.
a 2 gallon container full of water -- 10 lbs.
a battery operated signal light -- 8 lbs.
3 skin diving wet suits -- each 5 lbs.
2 buckets for bailing -- each 3 lbs.
4 wool blankets -- each 3 lbs.
a large S.O.S. flag -- 3 lbs.
a first aid kit -- 10 lbs.
8 oars -- each 5 lbs.
Total -- 140 lbs.

Adapted from Kahn, Elizabeth A., Carolyn C. Walter, & Larry R. Johannessen. (1984). "Making Small Groups Work: Controversy Is The Key." *English Journal*, 73.2 (February): 63-65.

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